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A Catholic Response to the Faith and Order Document on "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry"

After a long process of maturation that started in the early days of the *Faith and Order* Movement, the story of which has been told several times¹, the *Commission* issued in 1982 the well-known agreed statement on *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, asking the churches to prepare an official response to the text "at the highest appropriate level of authority"². With more than 20 reprints and about 350,000 copies circulating all over the world in 35 languages, the text can be considered a unique bestseller in ecumenical literature. A study of the statement was encouraged at all levels — in local ecumenical groups as well as in scientific seminars at universities — throughout the churches. Numberless articles have been published, scattered in many reviews in various languages³. The abbreviation BEM thus stands for an important ecumenical event. The joint study of the text brought divided Christians together and made them discover not so much their differences, as the common beliefs they already share with regard to such central realities as the sacraments, baptism and eucharist, the ministry and related issues. Along with the official reception of the text by the competent authorities of the churches, a perhaps more important process of gradual reception has been started at the grassroots. By February 1988 more than 170 official responses had been received at the Secretariat of the Faith and Order Commission in Geneva. 143 of them have been edited by Max Thurian in the six volumes of the invaluable documentation series *Churches Respond to BEM*⁴.

¹ See the story in a nutshell: *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (Faith and order paper n. 111). Geneva: WCC 1982 [henceforward: BEM]: Preface, p. vii-ix of MICHAEL KINNAMON, *Why it Matters* (Risk Books 25), Geneva: WCC 1985, pp. 9-20.

² BEM: Preface, p.x.

³ A key to the literature can be found in: J.F. PUGLISI-S.J. VOICU: *A Bibliography of interchurch and interconfessional theological dialogues*. Roma, Centro pro Unione 1984, updated in: *Bulletin of Centro Pro Union* (bi-annual).

⁴ *Churches Respond to BEM. Official Responses to the "Baptism, Eucharist and*

Since the General Assembly of the WCC at Uppsala in 1968, the Roman-Catholic Church has been taking part in the Faith and Order Commission. Of the 120 members of the Commission, twelve are officially appointed Catholic theologians, who participate on an equal footing with other members in the activities of this branch of the *World Council of Churches*. In fact the contribution to Faith and Order is at present the most significant area of collaboration between Rome and Geneva. Its importance has been recognized by both ecclesial centers. For many Catholic observers of the various projects of the WCC, Faith and Order work is the one dealing most specifically with the essentials of ecumenism and as such most consonant with its proper function in promoting Christian unity. This conviction has given a forceful impetus to the Catholic participation in F&O-work⁵.

The contribution of several Catholic theologians to BEM has been very significant. Having been involved in the process of drafting the statement the Roman-Catholic Church could not stand aloof when the churches were invited to respond in an official way. Following a period of study, the *Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity* published on July 21, 1987 its response to BEM⁶. As steps leading to the official answer we have to mention first of all a wealth of contributions and assessments, published by individual Catholic theologians and ecumenists throughout the world. Moreover, the *Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity* has sponsored a formal process of reflection and study. In an address held in Columbia S.C., USA on September 12, 1987, Cardinal Willebrands provided a description of this process⁷. First the *Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity*, which coordinated the procedure, invited the episcopal conferences, the theological faculties and individual theologians to study the document and to make known their views.

Ministry" text. Ed. MAX THURMAN. Vols I-VI. Geneva: WCC 1986-1988 (Faith and Order Paper 129, 132, 135, 137, 143, 144).

⁵ See e.g. "Letter of Cardinal Willebrands to Dr. Philip Potter (July 4, 1983)", *SPCU-Information Service* 1983/53, p. 120, § 3.

⁶ The original English text has been published in: *Churches Respond to BEM*, vol. VI (Geneva: WCC 1988) 1-40, *Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity / Information Service* 1987, n. 65, 121-139 and also in *Origins NC documentary service*, 17 (1987) 401-416. Translations can be found in: Italian: *Il Regno-documenti* 19 (1987) 612-626; French: *Documentation Catholique* 85 (1988) 102-119; German: *Herderkorrespondenz* 42 (1988) 27-43.

⁷ Not to multiply the footnotes, we refer to *Churches Respond to BEM*: vol. VI, with the pagenumber. In the notes we quote: *Response*.

⁸ *Catholic NC Documentation number* 17 (1988) 473-474

Many reactions were thus collected at the Secretariat. These were analyzed and studied by the staff with the help of a team of consultants, who drew up a draft response. Taking into account the material, the drafting team did not merely compile a summary of the observations received, but worked out its own coherent response. The latter was then finalized in collaboration with the *Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith*. In view of this collaboration between the local churches and the central authority of the church, Cardinal Willebrands designates the document "a unified Catholic response". As we have already seen, "an official response to the text" was to be formulated "at the highest appropriate level of authority". The *Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity* is indeed regarded as such an appropriate level, because not being a member of the WCC it "is the office through which the Holy See normally makes contact and undertakes collaboration with it. Thus the response is made on the level of the normal relationship between the Secretariat and the World Council of Churches"⁸.

On receiving the response Günther Gaßmann, the director of the Secretariat of Faith and Order, underlined, as also Cardinal Willebrands did, the fact that it marks the first time that the Roman-Catholic Church has officially responded to an ecumenical document⁹. The text is thus the official response asked for. But it does not intend to overrule other Catholic responses. It would be a further contribution to the discussion to publish some of the materials that have been sent to the *Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity*¹⁰. The Vatican response modestly calls itself "a Catholic response", a contribution to the ongoing dialogue. Yet, because of the weight of the Catholic Church in the ecumenical process, it is of course an important one, that will be examined closely. The drafters of the text were well aware of this. From the outset one should warn against overcharging the document. What E.J. Kilmartin remarks about the section on the eucharist applies equally to the whole document: it does not attempt to offer a complete systematic treatment and does not deal with all areas of theology and practice concerning baptism, eucharist and ministry¹¹. The *Secretariat*

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 572.

⁹ EPS 87.09.32, p. 31. See for Cardinal Willebrands: *Origins*, 17 (1988) 572.

¹⁰ The *Response of the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales*, has been published in *One in Christ* 22 (1986) 266-276; the one of the French episcopal commission for the unity of Christians in *Doc. Cath.* 82 (1985) 883-891, and the one of the Swiss bishops in *Doc. Cath.* 83 (1986) 174-178.

¹¹ EDWARD J. KILMARTIN, "The Official Vatican Response to BEM: Eucharist",

for Promoting Christian Unity presents a commentary on an existing text, and is as such conditioned by it. It responds by going through the text in a very analytical way and writing its observations "in the margin". This procedure renders the reading of the *Response* rather laborious for those who are not familiar with BEM and do not have the text in hand.

First Reactions to the Response

Besides the translations of the *Response* and a few short notices about it, only few detailed comments have appeared to date.

The first to react was, as could be expected, Günther Gaßmann, the director of the Secretariat of Faith and Order. According to an official press release published in Geneva, he made four points¹². First, as we have already mentioned, he noted that the Roman-Catholic Church has for the first time officially responded to an ecumenical document, affirming thereby "in a concrete, authoritative and unambiguous manner its commitment to and full participation in the one and comprehensive ecumenical movement". Secondly, he observed that critical comments are presented as suggestions for further work in Faith and Order. However he rightly added: "These comments ... may lead to a fruitful debate also within the Roman-Catholic Church concerning its own doctrinal and ecumenical position". He further quoted the *Response's* statement, saying that the acceptance of some sections by the churches can be a means of deepening the already existing communion and of advancing towards the goal of full visible unity. Lastly he mentions the encouragement given by the *Response* to multilateral dialogue.

Soon thereafter Beatus Brenner published a quite polemical leader in *MD*, the Protestant *Materialdienst des Konfessionskundlichen Instituts Bensheim*¹³, under the title Forward towards Rome? (Vorwärts nach Rom?). "As to the subject matter the Roman Response offers nothing new". It manifests no willingness to learn from the experience of others and to be changed by it. According to Rome, "Lima is a step in the right direction with its concentration on baptism, eucharist and ministry". Whereas Lima concedes too much in the eyes of Protestants,

¹² EPS 87.09.32, p. 31.

¹³ BEATUS BRENNES: "Vorwärts nach Rom?", *Materialdienst des Konfessionskundlichen Instituts Bensheim* 38 (1987) 81-82.

it lacks precision in a Catholic view. The *Response* witnesses to the general commitment of the Catholic Church to the ecumenical cause, but does not leave room for manoeuvring on decisive questions: "According to the Roman-Catholic conception the unity of the Church cannot be reached at a lesser price than the recognition of the full Catholic doctrine". "Does not the catch-word read: 'We don't step backwards, but forwards to Rome?' — Who wants to work in that direction, must say it. Who holds that direction for a disaster, should not keep silent". The concluding paragraph passes a judgment that goes far beyond the Roman *Response*, and instead involves the whole process of the reception of BEM.

Indeed, it would be wrong to overrate the Catholic answer to Lima. It is in continuity with the present ecumenics of convergence. Lima has tried to break through the neutrality of convergence on paper through statements and to introduce concrete points for a common ecumenical future of our churches. At the end of the reception process, only points in direction of one own's confession are offered as responses. To that extent the attempt of Lima must be considered a failure. The ecumenical signal is not for carrying on, but for a new beginning¹⁴.

As an initial reaction from an institute that has always been critical of developments within the Catholic Church and of the Lima-text, this article contains a quite understandable disappointment. Nonetheless, the reception process deserves much more patience than is evident here.

Interestingly enough, another Protestant commentator, A.J. Bronkhorst, comes more or less to the same conclusion at the end of a free translation and presentation of the *Response* in *Kerk en Theologie*¹⁵. From its ecclesiological self-understanding the Roman-Catholic Church views as acceptable progress in the ecumenical work of Faith and Order only "a progress in the Roman-Catholic direction"¹⁶. Bronkhorst finds in the *Response* several points that are quite unacceptable for the Protestant churches.

Does not the R.C. Response to the BEM-report suggest somewhat too easily that God's Spirit comes to us only from Rome? And that the authentic apostolic succession with regard to the apostolic faith, the

¹⁴ BEATUS BRENNER: a.c. 82.

¹⁵ A.J. BRONKHORST: "RK reacties op de BEM-rapporten". *Kerk en Theologie* 39 (1988) 57-66.

¹⁶ *ibid.* 28.

apostolic ministry and the apostolic Christian way of living reaches us only "from over the Alps"? With all respect for the reply the authors of the R.C. answer to the Faith and Order-Paper 111 have given us, I continue to have difficulty with it¹⁷.

On the Catholic side very little has been published on the *Response* until now. Among the first reactions there is the article of Piersandro Vanzan with the encouraging title *Un'altra importante tappa nel cammino ecumenico* (Another important stage in the ecumenical journey) in *La Civiltà Cattolica*¹⁸. In presenting the process that led to BEM and the importance of the Catholic answer he dwells especially upon its ecclesiological significance. However Vanzan's exaggerated statement that "out of its own identity the Catholic Church is entitled to speak in the name of the perennial and universal ecclesiology understood and intended by our Lord Jesus"¹⁹ only serves to strengthen the suspicions of a Brenner, Bronkhorst and many other Protestant observers.

Three articles published in *Ecumenical Trends* discuss the various parts of the *Response*: Kevin Irwin deals with baptism, Edward J. Kilmartin with the eucharist and Joan M. McGuire with ministry²⁰. The three contributions contain some valuable remarks on the document of the *Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity*. While the authors point to some limits of the *Response*, their overall assessment is quite positive as in the article on baptism:

... it must be asserted that together both BEM and the Vatican response mark a new and most serious phase in ongoing ecumenical sacramental consensus both from the point of view of agreement reached and of method to be employed in further ecumenical sacramental conversations²¹.

With regard to the text on eucharist, Kilmartin states,

The way in which CR [the Catholic Response] handles these themes, furnishes valuable information about where the Catholic Church now stands in the process of the movement of Christian churches toward the goal of an ecumenical profession of eucharistic faith²².

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 66.

¹⁸ PERSANDRO VANZAN, "Un'altra importante tappa nel cammino ecumenico: La risposta cattolica al BEM", *La Civiltà Cattolica* 139 (1988) 1, 236-248.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 242.

²⁰ KEVIN IRWIN, "The Official Vatican Response to BEM: Baptism", *Ecumenical Trends* 17 (1988) 33-37; EDWARD J. KILMARTIN, "Eucharist", *ibid.*, 37-40; JOAN M. MCGUIRE, "Ministry", *ibid.*, 41-43.

²¹ KEVIN IRWIN, *op.cit.* 36.

²² EDWARD J. KILMARTIN, *ibid.* 37.

And McGuire observes that the lengthy appraisal on ministry — “longer than other published responses” — is “positive and prodding”, although it “provides other churches with many transformative proddings. It lacks, perhaps, transformative proddings for the Catholic Church”²³.

A Preliminary Question: “The Faith of the Church through the Ages”

These comments may help us to evaluate the Catholic response. But first we should recall the questions posed by the Faith and Order Commission. In fact they had to guide the replies of the churches and gave them also an interesting parallel structure:

- ... the Commission would be pleased to know as precisely as possible — the extent to which your church can recognize in this text the faith of the Church through the ages;
- the consequences your church can draw from this text for its relations and dialogues with other churches, particularly with those churches which also recognize the text as an expression of the apostolic faith;
- the guidance your church can take from this text for its worship, educational, ethical, and spiritual life and witness;
- the suggestions your church can make for the ongoing work of Faith and Order as it relates the material of this text on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry to its long-range research project “Towards the Common Expression of the Apostolic Faith Today”²⁴.

The first question receives the greatest attention in the *Response*. However, it raises a preliminary hermeneutical question. What is meant by “the faith of the Church through the ages”? We have seen in the reviews of the first reactions to the *Response* how crucial the ecclesiological issue is. For precisely this issue is involved in the first question. On what ecclesiological stand does the *Response* rely?

In the intention of the Faith and Order Commission the question about recognizing the “faith of the Church through the ages” was meant to expatriate the churches somewhat from their own confessional certainties by opening a broader horizon, “a common Christian Tradition” or, as explained by the Montréal Conference, “the Tradition of the Gospel testified in Scripture, transmitted in and by the Church

²³ JOAN M. MCGUIRE, *ibid.*, 43.

²⁴ *ibid.*, 43.

through the power of the Holy Spirit". The phrase thus refers to "the continuity with the apostles and the teachings of the universal Church". It seems interchangeable with "the expression of the apostolic faith"²⁵. Glancing through the volumes of *Churches Respond to BEM*, however, one does not find much reflection on the meaning of the "faith of the Church through the ages". Some answer in a quite general way that they do recognize its validity to a certain extent. Others express some perplexity. The Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland does not find this form of question particularly meaningful or significant²⁶. For the Methodist Church (UK) it is not clear what is meant by the phrase and its authors propose a descriptive and a prescriptive understanding²⁷. The Church of Sweden has the same difficulty: the phrase is regarded as ambiguous, in that the churches will have to attribute different meanings to the expression²⁸. In fact almost all the churches greatly depend on their own confessional positions and indicate how consistent or inconsistent BEM is with Orthodox, Catholic, Anglican, Reformed or Wesleyan theology. Lukas Vischer has observed that, when the Commission's work happens to agree with a particular tradition, it is termed "highly significant", but, when it does not, it is usually labelled "insufficiently developed"²⁹.

The Catholic response does provide its interpretation of the "faith of the Church through the ages". At first sight its position is just as decidedly confessional as the other ones. It could therefore hardly escape the *bon mot* of Lukas Vischer. After close examination one has to conclude that terms such as "Catholic Church", "Catholic teaching", "Catholic practice" are used in an ambiguous way. Sometimes they have their full ecclesiological meaning, referring to "catholicity", as a note of the Church. Sometimes they clearly have a limited "confessional" meaning, expressing a clear distinction from the other Christian churches. Furthermore, often one can not discern what the meaning is. Again and again a rather indefinite "we" occurs. At times the approach is quite western and latin. Besides contingent limitations, which are

²⁵ The quotes are from BEM, Preface, p. ix and x.

²⁶ *Churches Respond to BEM*, I, 73.

²⁷ *Churches Respond to BEM*, II, p. 212-213.

²⁸ *Churches Respond to BEM*, II, 124. But also: o.c., II, 200f. (United Methodist Church, Central and Southern Europe); II, 264f. (Churches of Christ in Australia); II, 316f. (Mission Covenant Church of Sweden); III, 132 (Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod); III, 231 (Baptist Union of Scotland).

²⁹ According to MICHAEL KINNAMON, *Why it Matters*, p. 17.

inevitable in every document, the approach is linked to the ecclesiological self-understanding of the Catholic Church, which the *Response* indicates in a particular paragraph by referring to *Lumen Gentium* and *Unitatis Redintegratio*. The document does not intend, however, to “elaborate on the full Catholic ecclesiological self-understanding” (5). It is quite possible that the misunderstandings the document seeks to prevent come from less ecumenical-minded circles, which would consider the very fact of answering BEM as a relativisation of the Catholic position. In the Catholic Church — as indeed in all other churches — the interpretation of the “faith of the Church through the ages” is linked to its faith about the Church and its role in the economy of salvation. Like the Orthodox churches³⁰, however, the Roman-Catholic Church, because of its elaborate ecclesiology, grants a higher rank in the hierarchy of truths to the Church. At Vatican II the fathers tried to express their faith in the Church within an ecumenical context, by stating that “the Church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church” and by acknowledging the existence of ecclesial elements in other churches and ecclesial communities³¹. Further reflection is needed to determine how far involvement in the one ecumenical movement already has a true ecclesiological relevance which must be expressed in terms of reconciled ecclesial communion. Not only Faith and Order, but Catholic theology too must focus more directly on this aspect of ecclesiology, if future dialogue is to be fruitful.

In this light a reflection on the expression, “faith of the Church through the ages” would be welcome. It cannot be seen as a kind of yardstick by which to measure the doctrine and practices preserved in some ecclesiastic museum. I would like to compare it with the common and more comprehensive horizon in which all particular expressions are imbedded. No church disposes of this horizon, but all exist within its reach, as long as they remain faithful to their apostolic origins. It transcends their concrete existence and at the same time has to come to life in them. Or it can be said to be the Church’s blood and lymph, running through and feeding its body. Ultimately it escapes a fully adequate expression, even if any ecclesial community has to express it in

³⁰ See e.g. the Statement of the Russian Orthodox Church in *Churches Respond to BEM*, II 10-11.

³¹ FRANCIS A. SULLIVAN, “Subsistit In”. *One in Christ* 22 (1986) 115-123. See also: ID.: “‘Sussiste’ la Chiesa nella Chiesa cattolica romana?”. In: *Vaticano II: Bilancio & Prospettive venticinque anni dopo (1962-1987)*, a cura di RENÉ LATOURELLE. Assisi: Cittadella 1987, II, 811-823.

words and practices that are colored by the cultural and social limitations of time and space. Each church believes it can describe its faith with authority and **in** an authentic way. The ground of its certainty, however, lies **in** God's faithfulness. No church will ever exist without the tension between what it actually confesses as its faith and the reality it intends.

It is proper to the ecumenical dialogue that all churches have to confess **in** some way or another their faith **in** being the Church of Christ. So does the Catholic Church, when it confesses that the "unity of the one and only Church which Christ bestowed on his Church from the beginning ... continues to exist ("subsistit **in**")³² **in** the Catholic Church as something she can never lose, and we hope that it will continue to increase until the end of time"³³. Yet every church's faith and particular tradition are challenged by the larger context of the universal Church of Christ, the ecumenical commonwealth wherein it is viewed **in** relation to the others. The phrase **in** question has to be read **in** the light of an hermeneutics of unity, by asking what it might mean for reconciliation and communion and how it might serve this purpose.

Presentation of the Response

The answer presented by the *Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity* consists of five parts: I. *Introduction* - II. *The Ongoing Work of Faith and Order* - III. *BEM and the Faith of the Church*, which constitutes the central piece **in** which the three documents are discussed at length - IV. *Consequences of BEM for Ecumenical Relations and Dialogue* - V. *Conclusion*.

Rather than summarizing a document that is now easily available³⁴ and recommends itself for reading, I will dwell on some points that deserve special attention.

In the *Introduction* the significance of Faith and Order and of the evolution that led to BEM — "perhaps the most significant result of the movement so far" (2) — are positively appreciated. Referring to *Unitatis Redintegratio*, the *Response* underlines the urgency of Christian unity and sees **in** the convergence text, "if it were accepted, .. an important step forward **in** the ecumenical movement" (4). With its answer the Secretariat means to affirm its involvement **in** the ecumenical process.

³² SULLIVAN, *o.c.* 818.

³³ *Unitatis redintegratio* § 4.

³⁴ See note 6.

Thus, in responding to BEM, we seek both to identify and acknowledge the achievement, the forward steps that have been taken thus far and at the same time to see ourselves participating in a process which must continue toward the goal of the visible unity of Christians. The limitations of the document also limit the scope of our response. But we wish to affirm the process and to see it continue to flourish (4).

This commitment goes beyond the immediate task of providing an answer and entails participation in a wider process. It could not be taken for granted that the Catholic Church would answer at all.

We have already noted that the paragraph on *Catholic Ecclesiological Self-Understanding* is important. It forms the ecclesiological background of many questions which are dealt with in the document. Without elaborating on the full Catholic ecclesiological self-understanding, the *Response* states quite rightly the importance of the study of ecclesiology for the ecumenical movement: "it must come more and more into the center of the ecumenical dialogue" (5). The same advice can be found in other responses published in *Churches Respond to BEM*³⁵.

In the second section, *The Ongoing Work of Faith and Order*, the answer offers some suggestions in this regard summing up questions that are dispersed through the document. Three critical issues are proposed for consideration by the Faith and Order Commission: *Sacrament and Sacramentality*, *Apostolic Tradition and Authority in the Church*. The *Response* asks for a "further and deeper ecumenical exploration of the notion of sacrament and sacramentality", for "further study and clarification on the precise nature of apostolic tradition" and of the nature of authority in the Church, "a key issue for the progress of ecumenism" (6-9). All three are intimately related to the broader field of ecclesiology. The *Response* thus seems to return the ball back to the Faith and Order Commission. But in stating that ecclesiology is a crucial issue, the Catholic Church too must examine what its answer is in the light of the ecclesiological challenge provided by the ecumenical dialogue. It is not enough to ask for clearer definitions and greater precision, with the perhaps mistaken expectation that by doing so, Faith and Order will arrive at the right "Catholic" answer. The Catholic Church itself has to elaborate in this context a contribution that will foster unity among the churches — in faithfulness to the evangelical core of its own witness.

³⁵ See e.g. *Church of England: Churches Respond to BEM* III, 65.

Overall Evaluation

In the third section, *BEM and the Faith of the Church*, the three documents on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry are scrutinized. First a *general appreciation* of each text is given. In a longer section the *particular comments* then follow in the form of marginal comments on the various paragraphs. Thus, the whole section is somewhat fragmentary and now and then repetitive. The tone seems at times like that of a schoolmaster — “well-explained”, “well-presented”. On the whole the judgement is outspokenly positive. Regarding *baptism* the *Response* declares that the text is “grounded in the apostolic faith received and professed by the Catholic Church” (9), that the faith of the church is well-stated on such important points as the Christ-centeredness of baptism and the role of the Holy Spirit, its sacramental reality, its celebration, its institution by Christ, and its nature as God’s gift which demands our human response and responsibility (10f). Elsewhere the text is appreciated as “an invitation to a deep baptismal spirituality” (13). Further still: “the text about the celebration of baptism is liturgically rich and includes all of the classical elements related to that celebration” (15). With regard to the eucharist

Catholics can recognize ... much that corresponds to the understanding and practice of the apostolic faith or ... the faith of the church through the ages (16).

Among the points especially appreciated are mentioned: the sources used, particularly the classical liturgies of the first millennium and the patristic theology, the Trinitarian, Christological and eschatological dimension, the explanation of the action of the church in the eucharistic prayer, the central place that is given to the eucharist in the church’s worship, the implications for ecclesiology and mission³⁶. When treating of *ministry* the *Response* is also able to single out several points for special appreciation: the terminology used, again the Trinitarian, Christological and ecclesiological dimension of the text, “the well-balanced description of the ordained ministry as the result of God’s gratuitous initiative and of a commissioning by the church...”, the openness to a sacramental understanding, the presentation of the threefold ministry, and the pastoral perspective of the text (25f.). It is important to highlight the overall positive evaluation before considering some of the major criticisms.

³⁶ *Response*, p. 16f.

Baptism

In the section on baptism the *Response* mentions particularly the following points, without elaborating on them. It finds that the Lima-paper “does not give adequate attention to the implications of the fact that a person is baptized within a particular fellowship in a divided Christianity” (11). Besides stating the fact that BEM does not deal explicitly with the question of the necessity of baptism for salvation, it also regrets that the question of original sin, or at least the underlying understanding of universal human sinfulness and need for salvation, which has had a profound influence on baptismal doctrine and practice, remains obscure in the text (12). Consequently, it asks “that the doctrine of original sin, both in name and content, be explicitly incorporated into the discussion on the meaning and effects of baptism” (12). Such a discussion, however, would be rather complicated, not so much because the partners would not agree on the universal sinfulness of humanity and its need for salvation, but because of the divergent understandings of “original sin” not only in modern theology and in the Oriental but also in the Occidental tradition.

Regarding *baptismal practice* the document takes up the controverted question of the baptism of believers and infants. It fully recognizes the merits of the treatment, but asks nevertheless that the common ground between these two positions be clarified. One should not too easily gloss over the fundamental difference between the two positions, which for example causes the Baptist Union of Scotland to state that “There are at least two baptismal theologies and practices each of which has very different presuppositions”³⁷. The *Response* finds the distinction between *infants* and *believers* inadequate, because the former are also members of a believing community. The term adults is preferred to *believers*. But the point for the Baptists is not the stipulation of adulthood, but rather the view “according to which baptism is received by those — adults, young people, and children — whose faith has been awakened by the gospel”³⁸. Perhaps the criticism of the *Response* does not sufficiently take into account the difference on the one hand between conversion/baptism upon a personal profession of faith as it is practiced for theological reasons in Baptist churches, and

³⁷ *Churches Respond to BEM*, III, 235.

³⁸ Union of Evangelical Free Churches in the GDR, *Churches Respond to BEM*, IV, 192.

on the other hand baptism of adults as a pastoral reaction to "indiscriminate" baptism (14).

Finally the *Response* comments on the relation between "baptism — chrismation — confirmation". This point is significant for very different reasons, not only in the dialogue with Protestants, but also with Orthodox churches, as can be seen in the latest document of the Orthodox-Catholic International Dialogue, *Faith, Sacraments and the Unity of the Church*³⁹. The use of the same word *confirmation* for quite different realities permits terminological confusion to enter the discussion. Protestant churches rejected confirmation as a sacrament but recuperated it as a public confession of faith coupled with the admission to full membership in the congregation. The Orthodox churches celebrate the three sacraments of initiation in one single rite. The assertion in the *Response* that the emergence of a distinctive sacramental rite is both a normative development in the faith of the Church and a part of the liturgical process of Christian initiation that can stand on its own as a sacramental celebration matches the two objections (15). However, the statement that it is a "normative development" cannot be understood in an exclusive way. It expresses only the legitimacy of such an evolution in the West. In fact in a quite nuanced treatment of the question the Orthodox-Catholic International Commission stated recently that:

this pattern [the administration of the three sacraments in one celebration] remains the ideal for both churches since it corresponds the most exactly possible to the appropriation of the scriptural and apostolic tradition accomplished by the early Christian churches which lived in full communion with each other⁴⁰.

Eucharist

The *particular comments* on the *eucharist* deal with the previous reconciliation of sinners through the sacrament of penance. What is said, however, seems to minimize the explicit confession of sins and the absolution that are part of the Protestant rite, as a preparation for communion. Regarding the *sacrificial nature* of the eucharist, the document contends that the term "intercession" in BEM is too weak to express the sacrificial character.

³⁹ SPCU / *Information Service* (1987), n. 64, pp. 86-87.

⁴⁰ SPCU / *Information Service* (1987), n. 64, p. 87, § 46.

Since the High Priest is the crucified and risen Lord, his offering of self on the cross can be said to be "made eternal". His glorified body is the body of the Lord offered once-for-all (20).

Moreover:

Correspondingly, the description of the church's activity in the eucharist as thanksgiving and intercession needs to be filled out by some reference to the self-offering of the participants of the eucharist, made in union with the eternal "self-offering" of Christ (20)⁴¹.

The *Response* is very appreciative of the treatment of the *real presence* and recognizes its conformity to authentic doctrine. However, an objection is made to Commentary § 13 in BEM where the difference among the churches concerning the mode of Christ's real, living and active presence is described. The question whether this difference can be accommodated within the convergence formulated in the text itself, is answered quite forcefully: it cannot!

... we must note that for Catholic doctrine the conversion of the elements is a matter of faith and is only open to possible new theological explanations as to the "how" of the intrinsic change. The content of the word "*transubstantiation*" ought to be expressed without ambiguity. For Catholics this is a central mystery of faith, and they cannot accept expressions that are ambiguous (22)⁴².

A similar objection is voiced when BEM § 15 is addressed, which concerns bread and wine as the sacramental signs of Christ's body and blood. The sacramental sign must be linked to the *intrinsic change*, "whereby unity of being is realized between the signifying reality and the reality signified" (22). A further objection is made to the manner in which the presence of Christ in the consecrated elements after the celebration is treated. What does denial of this point mean for one's understanding of real presence and the reality of the conversion? (24). No doubt: "Further work must be done on this". In Catholic theology too further work is required on a large scale, an effort must be made to propose new theological explanations of the eucharistic faith based upon a richer understanding of the biblical roots of the eucharist and their reception in the patristic tradition of East and West. Reflection

⁴¹ See also *Response*, p. 21: "But the Catholic faith links the sacrificial aspect of the eucharist to the sacrament of the body and blood more closely than is done in the text".

⁴² Cfr. BEM, p. 12 § 13 and commentary (13).

upon the bilateral and multilateral ecumenical dialogues should moreover help to overcome the medieval and scholastic narrowing down of the doctrine, which has been further accentuated by the controversies with the Protestants concerning *transubstantiation*. One wonders whether “ambiguity” can be totally excluded. For “ambiguity” does not depend only on the way, always inadequate, of expressing a reality that transcends us infinitely, but also on the subjective context *in* which the expression and its interpretations are received and understood.

With regard to *eucharistic sharing*, a most crucial issue *in* ecumenical relations, the *Response* states that “it is impossible for the Catholic Church presently to engage *in* general eucharistic sharing” (25). The qualifier “general” refers to the fact that the guidelines on the participation *in* the eucharist allow the possibility of a limited and occasional sharing. The document recalls the ecclesial dimension of the action: “it is unity *in* the profession of faith that constitutes the core of ecclesial communion” (25)⁴³.

Ministry

The general appreciation of the part of BEM on *ministry* opens with a paragraph indicating some of the difficulties met *in* dealing with this crucial issue:

The statement on ministry deals with one of the central and most complex themes *in* ecumenical conversations. We are well aware that perhaps none of the churches or ecclesial communities represented *in* the Faith and Order Commission can find its faith and practice *in* regard to ministry fully reflected and stated *in* this document *in* precisely the way that it has understood and experienced it. It is necessarily influenced by the variety of views and practices present *in* the Faith and Order Commission. Furthermore, the ministerial structures of the churches and communities divided from one another are not only marked by differing theologies, but have also been affected by various historical and sociological developments within the churches which contribute heavily to shaping their identity...⁴⁴.

⁴³ See also: *Response*, p. 38: “This [the impossibility of eucharistic sharing] is because the notion of eucharistic sharing for the Catholic Church is intimately related to other basic factors such as unity *in* the whole faith of the church and particularly *in* regard to the church and the ministry”.

⁴⁴ *Response*, p. 133f. Also p. 134: “... who will discern God’s will *in* various developments and with what authority, are left open... Therefore the question of authority *in* the church must be studied *in* relationship to ministry”.

The difficulty, to which this introductory statement is pointing, is not of a particularly theoretic or theological nature. It is largely determined by historical, social and socio-psychological developments, that have shaped the structural and juridical identity of the churches — not to mention some of their confessional idiosyncrasies —, and even their outward ceremonial expression. In all churches the ministerial order has become a major feature of ecclesial identity. The intimate relation between contingent structures and their exterior shape on the one hand, and the ineluctable fundamental theological dimension of ministry on the other, render the discussion one of the most complex in the ecumenical dialogue.

Having already noted the positive appreciation of the *Response* to the presentation of ministry in BEM, we now turn to its critical remarks.

As a general but fundamental criticism, the *Response* points to the ecclesiological weakness of the treatment, and asks that future dialogue draw special attention to the “spiritual and sacramental dimension of the Church and its ministry”. Because “in a real and effective sense the Church is an icon of the presence of God and his kingdom in the world”, the Church and its ministry must be considered in their mutual relation (26).

What is the weight to be given to the *argument from antiquity*? Most Protestant churches criticize this way of arguing as prejudicial to the authority of God’s Word and as overdependent on Tradition. The Catholic answer on the contrary is sympathetic to it. But it is insufficient merely to state this fact without reflecting on the normativity of such antiquity and the authority that must discern such developments⁴⁴.

In the *Particular comments* on BEM, *Ministry II*, “The Church and the Ordained Ministry”, the *Response* calls for a sacramental ecclesiology, and thus asks for further qualification of the concept of “representation”:

... through its relation to the *Archetypos* Christ, the ordained ministry is in and for the Church an effective and sacramental reality by which a minister acts *in persona Christi*. (...) We should not hesitate to see, in light of tradition something of Christ’s real and sacramental presence in the ordained minister: a particular sign among others (29).

Therefore, the Catholic faith also holds that the eucharist must be presided over by an ordained minister.

⁴⁴ BEM, p. 29.

Furthermore, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* could not but treat the ministry of men and women in the church (II.D) and the controversial issue of the admission of women to the ordained ministry. The *Response* recognizes that the experience of churches which practice the ordination of women inevitably constitutes a challenge to the Catholic position, but states at the same time its belief that the church has no authority to change what is believed to belong to the apostolic tradition and is linked to an ancient understanding of Scriptures with regard to christology. Thus, the *Response* draws attention again to the more fundamental question of the interpretation of apostolic tradition and its authority. It notes, however, that this question should not jeopardize further dialogue on the ordained ministry. Furthermore, all churches, whether they like it or not, will in the future be confronted with the challenge that comes from an active and fully recognized ordained ministry of women in other parts of the Christian family.

The *Response* agrees of course with the positive evaluation of the threefold ministry given by BEM and articulated with the hope "that it may serve today as an expression of the unity we seek and also as a means for achieving it". Yet, this view must be deepened by asking whether this threefold form relates to ecumenical well-being and expediency, or to the fundamental and constitutive core, to the essence itself of the Church, since the latter is rooted in God's will as it has been discerned by ecclesial authority. "An ecumenical discernment is needed to see what belongs to the constitutive structure of the Church and what to the contingent social organization" (31).

In BEM the episcopacy is rightly described as "a focus of unity". The bishops express and safeguard the unity of the body at a local and a regional level. In this regard the Faith and Order document is in agreement with many texts of bilateral dialogues on episcopal ministry. But the *Response* finds lacking a mention of the quite traditional and essential collegial aspect of the episcopacy. Throughout history the bishops in their person symbolically represented their local church in councils and synods and related it to the universal Church. The "teaching function of the bishops", the *magisterium*, should be explicitly treated in this context. Referring to the papacy but understanding the reasons why Faith and Order could not treat it, the text asks whether a reflection on "the personal expression of a 'focus of unity' in the universal Church" would not be a logical topic of further discussion (32)?

Since *apostolic succession* is a recurrent issue in all ecumenical

dialogues on ministry, it is also treated **in** BEM, and consequently **in** the *Response*. The latter agrees with the comprehensive way **in** which the Lima-paper approaches the question, that is by bringing together various aspects of apostolicity and apostolic succession. But does not BEM juxtapose and list elements rather than show how they are related among themselves within the wider ecclesiological context? The nature of episcopal succession is dwelt upon **in** the discussion of BEM, *Ministry* § 38, where the episcopacy is called “a sign, though not a guarantee, of the continuity and unity of the Church”⁴⁴. As is often the case, the introduction of the concept “sign” is frustrating, because one tends to harden and formalize the meaning of the concept with abstract definitions. Yet the open question is to determine the nature of the sign, and to ask how “effective” or “sacramental” a given sign is. The *Response* summarizes the description it provides of the personal ministry of the bishop:

[it] is a sacramental sign of integration and a focus of communion. Through the episcopal succession, the bishop embodies and actualizes both Catholicity **in** time... as well as the communion lived **in** each generation (33).

In such a context one can even speak of the episcopal succession as a guarantee of the continuity and unity of the Church. Nonetheless, the expression may still evoke less fortunate associations with material and objective securities that are not within the realm of sacramentality. Therefore the *Response* enunciates two reservations. First, one has to recognize **in** the episcopal succession “the expression of Christ’s faithfulness to the Church to the end of time”. Outside this faith there is no guarantee. And secondly: such a guarantee functions neither formally nor automatically: it is always personal. “It lays upon each individual office-bearer the responsibility to be a faithful and diligent guarantor”. The office — which is a sign — calls necessarily for a responsible exercise: it must be carried out **in** good conscience by the minister (33). Holding a function is **in** itself no guarantee of how well and faithfully it will be exercised.

The description of *ordination* is positively valued: “the text — it is said — describes the act of ordination **in** a way consonant with the faith and the practice of the Catholic Church” (33). It “meets **in** many ways the Catholic concept of ordination as a sacrament”.

In the description of ordination essential elements for the sacrament are enumerated without, however, calling it a sacrament. Using the word

twice **in** a wider but significant way ... it points **in** the direction of a sacramental understanding (34).

Even if the *Response* laments that the convergence “does not express clearly the Catholic conviction that ordination is indeed a sacrament”⁴⁶, the admission that BEM is open to a sacramental understanding is important. It shows that there is convergence within the ecumenical movement towards an understanding of ministry that contains, without employing the word, the elements that many churches consider necessary to the nature of a sacrament. Catholic theology must be well aware that many Protestants will remain reluctant to accept the term “sacrament” after Luther’s attacks **in** *de Captivitate Babylonica*. Melancthon and Calvin on the contrary have occasionally spoken of the laying on of hands as a sacrament⁴⁷.

Linked to the sacramental understanding of ordination is the problem of the *competent minister*. Here the *Response* discovers a lacuna. For the Catholic tradition, “the competent minister of this sacrament is a bishop who stands **in** the authentic apostolic succession and who acts **in** the person of Christ”. This insistence is due to the ecclesiological meaning of the episcopal succession for ordination: it signifies and actualizes the sacramental link of the ministry with its apostolic origin (35).

It will not be an opportunistic “recovering of the sign of episcopal succession” that will solve the problem [of the mutual recognition], but newly gained convictions about God’s will and the guidance of the Holy Spirit regarding the constitutive features of church order, the episcopal succession and its exercise **in** ordination (36).

The conviction of the profound ecclesiological rooting and implications of the apostolic succession has immediate consequences for *the mutual recognition of ordained ministries*, “a crux **in** the endeavors toward Christian unity», because it is the concrete fact of sacramental ordination that stands at the heart of the recognition:

... the recognition of ordained ministry cannot be isolated from its ecclesiological context. The recognition of the ordained ministry and of the ecclesial character of a Christian community are indissolubly and mutually related. To the extent that it can be recognized that communion

⁴⁶ *Response*, p. 34. Also: “Our view, however, is that ordination is a sacrament” (35).

⁴⁷ For MELANCTHON, see *Apologia Confessionis Augustanae*, art. 13, BSELK 294; for CALVIN: *L’Institution de la Religion Chrétienne*. IV. 19. 28.

The text mentions a few particular consequences related to each of the three parts of BEM. With regard to baptism, it emphasizes that the sacrament is the basis for Christian unity. The recognition of the real bonds existing already on the basis of baptism is the foundation for a real, though imperfect communion between divided Christians. This conviction must be expressed and deepened (38). The *Response* sees no possibility for allowing reciprocal eucharistic sharing for the moment, but states,

that if all the churches and ecclesial communities are able to accept at least the theological understanding and description of the celebration of the eucharist as described in BEM and implement it as part of their normal life, we believe that this would be an important development and that these divided Christians now stood on a new level in regard to achieving common faith on the eucharist (38).

The acceptance of some of the proposals regarding ministry, such as the threefold office, would put the churches on a new level of relationship to one another. Moreover, there already exist grounds on which mutual respect for one another's ministry can begin to grow, and dimensions of fellowship be built which reflect the levels of communion that now exist (39). Some readers — I fear — will have difficulty with the consequences drawn. As a matter of fact, Faith and Order asked which consequences *your* church could draw for its relations with other churches. The *Response* seems to reverse the question, and to state what the *other* churches could do in order to improve their relations with the Catholic Church, by for example actually accepting some of the proposals of BEM with regard to the eucharist and ministry.

In its conclusion, the answer of the *Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity* recalls the intimate link existing between the sacraments and the Church. The statement is pivotal to an understanding of the orientation of the whole document:

For the Catholic Church, the truths of faith are not divided from one another. They constitute a unique organic whole. Therefore full agreement on the sacraments is related to agreement on the nature of the Church. The sacraments, including baptism, receive their full significance and efficacy from the comprehensive ecclesial reality on which they depend and which they manifest. Nor can the goal of the unity of divided Christians be reached without agreement on the nature of the Church (40).

The Catholic answer ends with a word of encouragement for Faith

and Order, and renews its own commitment to the ecumenical cause: "We recommit ourselves to this process with other churches and ecclesial communities in that serious task to which Christ calls all of us" (40).

Conclusion

After the Catholic answer to Lima the ecumenical signal is for carrying on! Certainly, the *Response* should not be overrated. It is an answer among the other ones. No one can doubt, however, that it will be read with critical attention. Its importance lies in the fact that after having taken part in the process of elaborating BEM, the Roman-Catholic Church has not remained silent at the moment of evaluation. In this sense the answer is an official appreciation of the work done; it is also the acceptance of a challenge. It is fair to say that the *Response* indicates more clearly what the Faith and Order Commission should do, and remains quite sparing about what the Roman Catholic Church itself could gain from the process and what consequences it could draw from it. Nevertheless it renews a genuine commitment of the Catholic Church to the ecumenical venture. In order that the *Response* be not considered merely a verbal commitment, the result of formal courtesy, it should be used so as to continue the process of reception accorded to BEM by the Catholic Church. With its experience of ecumenical involvement, the Catholic Church should reflect what dialogue between the churches implies twenty-five years after Vatican II. This dialogue has already attained an ecclesiological depth. It entails confessing one's own faith about the Church within a greater Christian commonwealth, the universal Church, — "a communion, at various levels of fullness, of bodies that are more or less fully churches"⁴⁹. This wider ecclesial context is more comprehensive than any of its particular realisations in time and space, a truth which the Catholic Church admits in stating that in its particular communion the Church of Christ subsists in fullness. History has accustomed churches to restrict the full expression and the formal confession of their faith by defining it over against various opponents. In an ecumenical context and with the newly gained

⁴⁹ SULLIVAN, *a.c.* 123. "The Church of Christ is certainly something more than any such "collection" (summa); it is a real communion, realized at various degrees of density of fullness, of bodies, all of which, though some more fully than others, have a truly ecclesial character" (*ibid.*).

awareness of being "church-in-relation", how can the whole Church recuperate something of its width and comprehensiveness and recognize in its converging elements the essence of its faith? Real dialogue must be carried on and *listening* to one another is one half of it. "Openness to each other holds the possibility that the Spirit may well speak to one church through the insights of another"⁵⁰.

It has been rightly underlined that ecclesiology should be one of the central topics — and not the easiest one — in future work of the Faith and Order Commission. A Consultation, to be held in Turku, Finland in July 1988, will begin to deal with it. Ecclesiology is also the background of the Catholic response. More than once the issue is raised in the document. In accord with the Second Vatican Council, the Church is presented as *a communion with a sacramental nature*. Such a view will create no difficulty for the Oriental churches. On the contrary, it will not be so readily accepted by the Protestant churches⁵¹. This view means that all the sacraments, and particularly baptism, eucharist and ministry, are rooted in the Church. This includes a re-evaluation of the discipline of sacramentology, which prevailed at the time of the Reformation and the Council of Trent, when Catholics and Protestants alike understood the sacraments in a more isolated way as individual means of grace, without paying much attention to their ecclesiological foundation. "Medieval theology elaborated a treatise on the sacraments after christology, without an explicit ecclesiology".⁵² This common heritage and the change of prospective in Catholic sacramentology must be taken into account when studying the symbolic dimension of the Church.

There is another aspect too: the Church in which the whole sacramental activity is rooted is itself described as a sacrament, the fundamental sacrament (*Ursakrament*), "the universal sacrament of salvation"⁵³, an effective sign of salvation and grace, that through Word and sacraments, effects and actualizes salvation for us. The question has

⁵⁰ BEM Minstry § 54.

⁵¹ For a survey of the positions with regard to the sacramentality of the church, see: MIGUEL M^o. GARRIGU-GUENBE, *Gemeinschaft der Heiligen*, Düsseldorf: Patmos 1988, 98-104. Also: GÜNTHER GAßMANN: "The Church as Sacrament, Sign and Instrument. The Reception of this Ecclesiological Understanding in Ecumenical Debate". In: *Church, Kingdom, World*, ed. by GENNADIOS LIMOURIS (Faith and Order Paper 130), Geneva: WCC 1986, 1-17.

⁵² YVES CONCAR, "Le développement de l'évaluation ecclésiologique des églises non-catholiques". In: *Unitatis Redintegratio 1964-1974*, Ed. by GERARD BÉRÉS and VILMOS VÁRTA (SIAS 71), Roma: Anselmiana 1977, p. 64.

⁵³ *Lumen Gentium* § 48.

been raised by the Roman-Catholic / Lutheran Joint Commission in *Facing Unity*:

At the same time it becomes clear why on the Catholic side one speaks today of the Church as the "Sacrament". The Lutheran tradition is not yet very familiar with this thought, and it is often inclined to criticize it. But its intention should be acceptable for Lutherans: as the body of Christ and "koinonia" of the Holy Spirit, the Church is the sign and instrument of God's grace, an instrument that of itself can do nothing. The Church lives by the word as it lives by the sacraments and at the same time stands in their service⁵⁴.

Suspensions and misunderstandings will remain for the time being, especially because of the fierce assault of the Protestant reformers against all that could stimulate in the human person an innate pretentious and sinful self-glorification. The Catholic Church will have to accept the sting of this criticism and witness to the sacramentality of the church by humbly confessing its sinfulness and its faith. At the same time, Protestant theology must draw out the consequences of a theology of creation and incarnation, by which God gracefully sanctifies the totality of the human reality, its suffering and its joy, to make it a fragile but effective icon of his divinity. On this crossroad stands the Church ... not without temptations and ambiguities but trusting also in God's faithful love that endures for ever.

JOS E. VERCRUYSE, S.I.

⁵⁴ Roman Catholic / Lutheran Joint Commission *Facing Unity*, § 85.

RÉSUMÉ

L'article s'occupe de la Réponse officielle du Secrétariat pour l'Unité des Chrétiens au document "Baptême, Eucharistie et Ministère", élaboré par la Commission de Foi et Constitution (Conseil Oecuménique des Eglises). Voir le texte original anglais dans *Churches Respond to BEM*, vol. VI (Genève: WCC 1988) 1-40, et la traduction française dans *Documentation Catholique* 85 (1988) 102-119. Après avoir décrit l'histoire du texte, l'article présente les premières réactions au texte. Pour comprendre l'orientation du document il faut examiner son point de départ ecclésiologique, c.-à-d. ce qu'on entend par "la foi de l'Eglise à travers les siècles" (BEM, Préface) et comment l'Eglise catholique se situe dans le mouvement oecuménique. Le corps de l'article consiste en une discussion du texte de la Réponse. Dans la conclusion l'auteur attire l'attention sur l'importance du document comme témoignage de l'engagement de l'Eglise Catholique dans le mouvement oecuménique. Mais il invite également à poursuivre la réflexion sur l'Eglise comme communion avec une structure sacramentelle. Cette vue constitue l'ecclésiologie qui porte la réponse catholique au BEM. Foi et Constitution devra consacrer une partie de son travail futur à l'étude de la nature de l'Eglise, de son unité et de son aspect sacramentel.

Vatican Ecumenism at the Crossroads? The Vatican Approach to Differences with *BEM*

Introduction

If *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*,¹ may be described as the landmark document of the ecumenical movement in this century, its official appraisal by the largest Christian Communion which is not formally a member of the World Council of Churches represents a momentous milestone in the history of Roman Catholic ecumenical engagement.² It does so, in a sense, quite apart from the content of its response. The very *fact* of this Vatican document signals a significant juncture in the history of the Catholic Church. This appraisal marks the first time that it has accepted an invitation issued to all the churches to make an official response — “at the highest appropriate level”³ — to a multilateral ecumenical document. By accepting this invitation, the Roman Catholic Church places itself alongside all of the other churches that have responded to the Lima document.⁴ This gesture itself is of great ecumenical significance.

Beyond the gesture, the content of this Vatican response constitutes a weather vane. It is the most accurate indicator to date of the direction of the Vatican with respect to the vital issue of church unity. To assess the status of the ecumenical question in the Catholic church

¹ Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982. This document will be cited in parenthesis in the body of the text by a letter designating the section and by a number designating the paragraph. “Com” appearing after a number refers to a commentary paragraph.

² The Response is published as *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry: An Appraisal* *Origins* 17 (1987): 401-416. Also in *Churches Respond to BEM*, vol. 6, edited by Max THURIAN. Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1988. This document will be cited in the body of the text by page numbers of the WCC edition, placed in parentheses.

³ *BEM*, Preface, x.

⁴ Of which six volumes have been published to date: *Churches Respond to BEM: Official Response to the “Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry” Text*, vols. 1-6. Ed. Max THURIAN. Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1986-1988.

one can examine many indicators. One can read the contributions of Roman Catholic theologians — in fact, *BEM* itself is the product of the collaboration of Catholic theologians with those of other communions represented in the Commission on Faith and Order. But the statements of Catholic theologians are not the official word of the Church. In search of a bellwether of Roman Catholic ecumenical intentions, one can also look to the fine statements concerning the urgency of ecclesial unity made by Pope John Paul II. Such statements are certainly official. Yet often they remain rather general. One could also turn to the statements issued by the agency directly responsible for ecumenism, the Secretariat for the Promotion of Christian Unity. Many of these are certainly specific and, coming from a Vatican agency, official; but one may still wonder, do these statements carry the authority of the highest echelons within the hierarchy?

Much of the time, then, we deal with statements that are official but not overly specific, or with statements that are specific but not fully authoritative. The recent Vatican response to *BEM* is both specific and official — its authority secured by the weight of two Vatican agencies. It was indeed drafted by the Secretariat for Christian Unity, but its final form is the result of collaboration with the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, an agency higher on the hierarchical ladder and far more powerful within the Vatican.

Given the status of the Vatican response, then, Edward Kilmartin's comment regarding its eucharist section can safely be paraphrased to apply to the response as a whole: the way in which this document handles various themes furnishes valuable information about where the Catholic Church now stands in the process of the movement of Christian churches toward the goal of an ecumenical profession of faith.⁵ Furthermore, given the landmark nature of the Lima document, its invitation places the churches that respond at an ecumenical crossroads. A document as authoritative and specific as the Vatican response likely contains signals that at least hint at the intended direction of the Catholic Church at this ecumenical crossroads.

⁵ EDWARD J. KILMARTIN in *Ecumenical Trends* 17 (1988): 37. His comment reads: "The way in which CR [the Vatican Response] handles these themes, all of which are matters of controversy in ecumenical dialogues, furnishes valuable information about where the Catholic Church now stands in the process of the movement of Christian Churches toward the goal of an ecumenical profession of eucharistic faith". This issue (no. 3) contains articles examining the Vatican's response to each of the three sections of *BEM*. On baptism, KEVIN IRWIN (pp. 33-37); on Eucharist, EDWARD J. KILMARTIN (pp. 37-40); and on ministry, JOAN MCGUIRE (pp. 41-43).

To uncover these clues, we shall focus primarily on what might be called neuralgic points, sensitive issues on which the Vatican considers *BEM* to "fall short". This focus is not meant to minimize the significance of the many positive comments on *BEM* in the Vatican document.⁶ Nevertheless, to discern the ecumenical direction in which this Vatican document points, it is crucial to examine carefully the issues on which it demurs, and — perhaps even more importantly — the manner in which it demurs. Where possible, I shall compare the Vatican response to that drafted under the aegis of the National Council of Catholic Bishops of the United States.⁷ This comparison is the more significant because the US document was prepared in response to a Vatican request to all National Conferences. These national responses were used as a basis for drafting the official Vatican response. Hence, where divergences in substance and approach appear, we may assume that the Vatican has wittingly chosen a different tack.⁸

The general response to *BEM* as a whole is rather positive. The Vatican observes at the outset that "Even though we think that the text falls short at certain points, we believe that if it were accepted by the various churches and ecclesial communities, it would bring the churches to an important step forward in the ecumenical movement ..." (4). Turning to its own responsibility, the Vatican presents its response as an expression of its commitment to "a process that must continue toward the goal of the visible unity of Christians" (4).

The most general and most often repeated Vatican criticism of

⁶ These are treated extensively in the issue of *Ecumenical Trends* mentioned in the previous note.

⁷ "The Official Response to the *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* Document of the WCC Faith and Order Commission", Bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (United States): September 18, 1985. This document consists mainly of suggested revisions of *BEM*, together with explanatory comments. This response will be referred to in the body of the text by page numbers.

Where appropriate, reference will also be made to the responses authorized by the British and French Bishops' Conferences: "Response to Lima Statement", *Briefing* 16/5 (1986): 66-73; "Le Texte de Foi et Constitution 'Baptême, Eucharistie, Ministère', Response de la Commission épiscopale française pour l'Unité des chrétiens", *La Documentation Catholique*, no. 1902 (15 September, 1985): 883-891.

⁸ For our purposes, divergences between the two documents are significant apart from the question as to which document reflects Catholic doctrine more faithfully. In fact, usually this is not even a question; for, in assessing *BEM*, the two responses often proceed from the same basic doctrinal position. Given this basic agreement, differences in approach and tone between the two documents are all the more significant in placing into greater relief the Vatican's ecumenical stance.

BEM deserves to be noted at the outset. It finds the Lima document lacking especially in this area of ecclesiology. Early in the response it articulates this concern in the form of a *desideratur*: "It is our conviction that the study of ecclesiology must come more and more into the center of the ecumenical dialogue. Perhaps the best reflection on *BEM* will come after ecclesiology is given more serious attention in the ecumenical dialogue" (5). Later, it presses the issue more pointedly, "It is clear to us then that Faith and Order must focus more directly on ecclesiology. We believe that without serious attention to the broader questions of ecclesiology there are disadvantages not only for the study and understanding of *BEM*, but for our ecumenical progress as well" (5). Throughout the response, this concern returns as a lament concerning the insufficient elaboration of the ecclesiological dimensions of various issues. It spells out the principal issues it has in mind: "the notion of sacrament (and sacramentality), the precise nature of the apostolic tradition, and the issue of decisive authority in the church" (6). The Vatican here rightly puts its finger on ecclesiology as the key issue in the current ecumenical discussions. The way in which the churches deal with this issue will determine the course of ecumenism for years to come. Unfortunately, the Vatican response is as vague on this subject as *BEM* is putatively inadequate.⁹ In this assessment, therefore, we cannot deal directly with the Vatican's central criticism. Nevertheless, in keeping with this general critique, the topics to be considered in this essay revolve around the pivotal issue of ecclesiology.

Baptism

If the formulation of its general appreciation of each of *BEM*'s three main sections is any indication, the Vatican is more positive regarding baptism than it is regarding the eucharist. The Vatican affirms that the text on baptism is "grounded in the apostolic faith received and professed by the Catholic Church" (9). It then proceeds to indicate more specifically its appreciation of *BEM*'s treatment of baptism, such as its trinitarian elaboration, its centrality in God's salvific plan, and its sacramentality.

One of the most interesting points of criticism concerns the way in

⁹ Cf. GEORGE WORGUL, Jr., "Lima's Ecclesiology: An Inquiry", in *Catholic Perspectives on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, ed. MICHAEL FAHEY (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1986), 85-107.

which *BEM* emphasizes the unity that is *given* with baptism. The Lima document states that "our common baptism, which unites us to Christ in faith, is thus a basic bond of unity. We are one people ...". Further it refers to this as the "baptismal unity" that is "realized in one holy, catholic, apostolic Church" (B6).

The Vatican response affirms the unity that is given with baptism, but immediately introduces a qualifier. It agrees that there can be only one baptism into one Lord and thus into one Body, i.e., into one church. The Vatican response also affirms the crucial point made in *BEM* that baptism, in uniting us to Christ, establishes a bond among believers that is deeper than anything that divides them. It faults *BEM*, however, for not giving adequate attention "to the implications of the fact that a person is baptized within a particular ecclesial fellowship in a divided Christianity" (11). This observation could simply reflect a concern to inject a dose of realism into the discussion: There is but one baptism, but we are baptised within communities that are, after all, anything but one. Such realism echoes the warning against "false irenicism" sounded by the Second Vatican Council in its *Decree on Ecumenism*.¹⁰ By false irenicism, the Council had in mind an appeal to unity that papers over the reality of divisions, a head-in-the-sand ecumenism that blurs distinct features of Catholic doctrine.

Nevertheless, it is interesting to compare the U.S. response on this point. In its suggested revisions of this section in *BEM*, it goes in precisely the opposite direction: rather than qualifying the reality of unity in the face of the visible reality of disunity, the U.S. response reinforces the reality of unity in order to qualify visible disunity as a scandal. They do so by suggesting several significant revisions of the *BEM* text. First, the U.S. response underscores the significance of the bond of unity given with baptism by speaking of it as a sign and seal of an "indestructible bond". Elsewhere, the U.S. response accentuates this unity once more by inserting the word "real" before unity. As if that were not enough, it explicates this unity as one that entails a "real communion between churches".¹¹ The intent of these revisions in the body of the Lima text are confirmed by the suggested amendment of the heading of this paragraph. The heading in the *BEM* text reads rather blandly "Incorporation into the Body of Christ". The heading suggested

¹⁰ *Unitatis Redintegratio*, no. 11.

¹¹ It is significant that the Vatican response speaks of a bond among *Christians*, while the U.S. report refers at this point to the bond among *churches*.

in the U.S. response unmistakably highlights the reality and urgency of unity: "Members of One Body and Christian Unity" (6).¹²

By pressing home the significance of the unity that exists by virtue of baptism, the U.S. document is not indulging in false irenicism. It acknowledges the existing divisions, suggesting that a revised version of *BEM* deal with this issue in a new introductory chapter. Thus while fully recognizing the reality of division, the approach of the U.S. response is quite different from that of the Vatican document. The U.S. response does not view the obvious divisions solely from the perspective of realism. It places them in the context of sin and repentance. It wishes to sharpen the Lima document precisely on this point. Where it appeals to the baptismal bond as "a call to the churches to overcome their divisions", the U.S. response renders this call considerably more pointed by appealing to the unity of our baptism as constituting a "call to the churches to *repent* of our *sinful* divisions ..." (7).

The U.S. response does not contradict the Vatican response at this point. But it does shift the centre of gravity. Instead of immediately qualifying the reality of the unity given with baptism by pointing to the harsh and even more obvious reality of division, as the Vatican response does, the U.S. response tackles the reality of existing unity in such a way that the divisions are thrown in bold and painful relief. These confront us, not solely as a reality to be taken into account, but as a scandalous reality, as a gaping wound, as sinful division that requires concrete repentance. In this the U.S. response echoes the Second Vatican when it speaks of such divisions as a scandal for the world,¹³ and the words of Pope John Paul II, when he speaks of the "intolerable scandal of Christian divisions".¹⁴

¹² The ecumenical usefulness of the "body" analogy (used by *BEM* at this point and elaborated in the revised heading suggested by the U.S. response) may be limited, but this does not effect the significance of the contrast between the U.S. and the Vatican response. Regarding these limitations, see for example JOSEPH RATZINGER, "The Ecclesiology of Vatican II", *Origins* 15 (1985): 374: "Either you are members or you are not, there are no halfway terms".

¹³ *Unitatis Redintegratio*, no. 1.

¹⁴ In an address to the plenary meeting of the Secretariat for the Promotion of Christian Unity, November 1978, JOHN PAUL II, *Addresses and Homilies on Ecumenism, 1978-1980*, ed JOHN B. SHEERIN and JOHN F. HOTCHKIN (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Catholic Conference, 1981), pp. 3-4.

Eucharist

The Vatican acknowledges that the *BEM* text on the eucharist contains "much that corresponds to the understanding and practice of the apostolic faith...". The Vatican response singles out for positive comment elements such as the affirmation of the real presence of Christ, the centrality ascribed to the eucharist, the emphasis on its trinitarian aspects, and the articulation of some important ecclesiological dimensions (16-17).

Of the topics the Vatican subjects to critical comment, I shall examine two, namely, the real presence of Christ in relationship to the "real change" of the elements, and the understanding of the eucharist as sacrifice.

The Vatican is rather emphatic in its appreciation of *BEM*'s affirmation of the real presence of Christ (16, 17, 21). It is even more emphatic, however, in its insistence on the necessity of believing in the real change of the elements: *BEM* notes in a commentary that some churches believe that the bread and wine become in a real sense the body and blood of Christ, while others do not link Christ's real presence "so definitely with the signs of bread and wine" (*BEM* E15com.) Interestingly, the Vatican document objects to placing these differences next to one another in this way. It charges that, by suggesting that this difference can be accommodated within the common affirmation of the *real* presence of Christ, *BEM* relativizes the *belief* in the change of the elements (22). The Vatican response appeals to the Catholic faith in a way that, for all practical purposes, closes the discussion. The statement is worth quoting in full:

On the one hand, we welcome the convergence that is taking place. On the other hand, we must note that for Catholic doctrine the conversion of the elements is a matter of faith and is only open to possible new theological explanations as to the how of the intrinsic change. The content of the word *transubstantiation* ought to be expressed without ambiguity. For Catholics this is a central mystery of faith, and they cannot accept expressions that are ambiguous. Thus it would seem that the differences as explained here cannot be accommodated within the convergence formulated in the text itself. Further work must be done on this (22).¹⁵

¹⁵ Though dissatisfied with the ambiguity in B15com, the French response considers *BEM* adequate on the issue at hand. It distinguishes three *niveaux* of affirmation regarding the eucharist, namely, 1) the objective presence of Christ, 2) the change of the elements, and 3) transubstantiation. It then declares that B15 affirms level "2)" in a manner that is

The Vatican response is significant, not so much because it strongly insists on the affirmation of the contents of "transubstantiation", but especially because it forces the issue to an ecumenical breaking point. It does this so by declaring the real change of the elements to be not only an article of faith but even "a central mystery of faith". This blunt confessionalization of the issue is reinforced when it objects to *BEM*'s description of some "who consider it necessary to assert a change of the elements" (E15com). The Vatican deems "assert" to be far too weak a term and suggests that the formulation "*consider it necessary to confess* would be more appropriate" (23, note 9).

The Vatican adamance on this score is unmistakable. A refrain that echoes throughout the document after points of disagreement have been exposed receives an interesting elaboration. Usually the concluding sentence reads, "Further work must be done on this". Regarding the conversion of the elements, however, the Vatican obviously wishes to leave no doubt as to the direction which such work is to take: "Since this matter relates to the important question of the real presence, further work is needed *from the perspective of Catholic faith*" (23, emphasis added).

The forcing of a specific understanding of the real presence of Christ as a do-or-die issue, stands in stark contrast to the approach in the U.S. response. It expresses appreciation for the fact that the *BEM* commentaries "take into explicit account Catholic understandings of 'the change of the eucharistic elements into the body of Christ'" as well as of the "Catholic explanation of the change...". This approach is especially striking in that it does not relativize Catholic dogma on this score by declaring it to be optional. Rather, it in effect insists on taking *BEM* at its word. When the Lima document affirms "real presence", the U.S. response accepts it as meaning just that, real presence. As a result it concludes that *BEM* agrees with Catholic teaching. At the same time, the U.S. response affirms the Catholic dogma which "univocally states the change of bread and wine into the body and blood" (11). This represents a relativization different from that against which the Second Vatican Council cautions. The U.S. document does not declare the doctrine of the real change of the elements to be unimportant. Rather,

"wholly satisfactory to a Catholic" (*La Documentation Catholique*, no. 1902 [1985], 885).

Despite its misgivings about *BEM*'s handling of some of the issues surrounding "real presence", the British report welcomes *BEM*'s affirmation of "the unique and objective nature of Christ's presence in the eucharist", which it describes as "the background and basis for Catholic practice of devotion to the blessed sacrament" (*Briefings* 16/5 [1986]: 71).

it relativizes it *in the ecumenical context* by declaring that church unity does not depend on *agreement* on the change of the elements in the eucharist. From this perspective, one can judge a communion that affirms the real eucharistic presence of Christ but does not affirm the real change of the elements to be inconsistent. Whether one considers this be regarded as a happy or a sad inconsistency, it need not be divisive, because one proceeds in the trust that the *reality* of Christ's presence, and apparently its affirmation, does not depend on an understanding of the specific mode of this presence.¹⁶

It is highly significant that for this crucial move, the US Bishops committee invokes a key notion of Vatican II, namely, the idea of a "hierarchy of truths". In its *Decree on Ecumenism*, the Second Vatican Council stated that in ecumenical dialogue, theologians should keep in mind that in "Catholic doctrine there exists an order or "hierarchy" of truths, since they vary in their relation to the foundation of the Christian faith".¹⁷ The late insertion of this notion into the decree on ecumenism was hailed by many as a momentous breakthrough.¹⁸ In doing so, the Council recognizes that all doctrines of the church are not equally important. This seems entirely obvious. Yet the official acknowledgement of this fact was exceedingly significant, in view of a document issued some four decades before the Second Vatican. In his 1928 encyclical, *Mortalium Animos*, Pope Pius XI declared the distinction between fundamental and non-fundamental articles of faith to be illegitimate. The Pope illustrates the intent of this declaration by placing the teachings concerning the trinity and the incarnation on the same level as those concerning the immaculate conception of Mary and the infallibility of the Pope.¹⁹ By contrast, the introduction of the notion of

¹⁶ Interestingly, a statement elsewhere in the Vatican response could have provided an opening for an approach along the lines of that of *BEM* and of the U.S. response sketched above. We read: "The statement [in *BEM*] about the fact and the mode of Christ's 'unique' presence, which 'does not depend on the faith of the individual', is adequate" (21).

¹⁷ *Unitatis Redintegratio*, no. 11.

¹⁸ For an excellent survey and analysis of the discussion of the notion of hierarchy of truths before, during and after Vatican II, see WILLIAM HENN, *The Hierarchy of Truths according to Yves Congar* (Rome: Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 1987). For the significance of this notion for the reception of *BEM*, see GEORGE VANDERVELDE, "BEM and the 'Hierarchy of Truths': A Vatican Contribution to the Reception Process", forthcoming in *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 25:1 (1988).

¹⁹ *Mortalium Animos*, no. 9; *The Papal Encyclicals 1903-1939*, Ed. CLAUDIA CARLEN. Raleigh: McGrath, 1981. The affirmation of the "hierarchy of truths" by the Second Vatican and the rejection of the distinction fundamental non-fundamental by Pius XI need not be in conflict. The Pope was concerned about an appeal to the distinction that would declare non-fundamental articles of faith to be non-binding. Nevertheless the approach to

a hierarchy of truths by the second Vatican encourages some kind of ordering, and thus ranking, of doctrines.

While the hierarchy of truths functions as a guiding principle for the U.S. response as a whole,²⁰ it is explicitly invoked only with respect to the issue of real presence.

In the hierarchy of truths, the developed Catholic explanation of the mode is not critically fundamental for acceptance by other Christian traditions in order for them to recognize the faith of the Church through the ages. Thus, the recognition [in *BEM*] of the real sacramental presence and of Christ's body and blood truly received agrees with Catholic teaching, although our later dogma univocally states the change of bread and wine into the body and blood (11).

The ecumenical significance of the "hierarchy of truths" is demonstrated by the contrasting approaches to *BEM* under consideration. The Vatican response avoids the Second Vatican's notion altogether. Accordingly, it simply declares the content intended by the term "transubstantiation" to be an article of faith. Accordingly, it finds the *BEM* statement to be unacceptable. The U.S. response by contrast, proceeds from the idea of a hierarchy of truths. Accordingly, it declares the *BEM* statement to be accurate and acceptable.

Another key point of the Vatican criticism of *BEM*'s treatment of the eucharist concerns the notion of sacrifice. By its very nature, this theme bridges the discussion of real presence and the subsequent discussion of ministry; the former deals essentially with the presence of a real sacrifice of Christ; a central issue in ministry concerns the question who is authorized to officiate at this sacrifice.

The Vatican response again expresses appreciation of the fact that *BEM* links eucharist with sacrifice: "The connection established between the sacrifice of the cross and the eucharist corresponds to Catholic understanding", namely, that the sacrifice of the cross is salvifically represented in the sacrifice of the eucharist (19). The Vatican response is critical primarily of the way in which the Lima

ecumenism of the two documents is entirely different. In that context, the advocacy of the "hierarchy of truths" by the Second Vatican marks a new chapter in ecumenism within the Catholic Church.

²⁰ In giving the outline of its response, the U.S. document states right at the outset: "We list those statements in which we recognize 'the faith of the Church through the ages'. We attempt to arrange these statements in such a way that would highlight the 'hierarchy of truths'". Further it suggests that the theme be taken up in a new first chapter of *BEM* (*U.S. Response*, pp. 1, 2).

document accounts for the sacrificial nature of the eucharist. *BEM* appeals almost exclusively to the inclusion of the church in Christ's intercession. The Vatican recognizes that this notion is in accord with Catholic teaching (19-20). In its judgement, however, *BEM* often uses the notion of intercession "in a way that could seem insufficient to explain the sacrificial nature of the eucharist in the Catholic sense" (20). In this appeal to Christ's intercession, the Vatican considers *BEM* to bypass too quickly the nature of Christ's presence in the eucharist. In other words, this appeal focusses onesidedly on the activity of the exalted Christ and passes over the eucharistic presence of the risen *crucified* Christ. The Vatican agrees that the unique sacrifice of the cross cannot be repeated. "But since the high priest is the crucified and risen Lord, his offering of self on the cross can be said to be 'made eternal'" (20). In other words, the eucharist is a sacrifice not simply by virtue of the church's inclusion in the exalted Christ's intercessory activity, but especially by virtue of Christ's presence as the crucified One. As the body and blood of Christ himself, the elements of bread and wine constitute the eucharist as a sacrifice. This needs to be affirmed even in abstraction from the church's inclusion in Christ's intercession. The Vatican objects to *BEM*'s presentation of the latter as the only ground for regarding the eucharist as a sacrifice, at the expense of the primary ground, the presence of the Crucified.

As has become evident, the understanding of the eucharist as sacrifice is intrinsically related to the understanding of real presence.²¹ This becomes obvious when the issue of the sacrificial nature of the eucharist obtrudes in the midst of the discussion of real presence: "Only insofar as Christ offers himself to the Father in the sacrificial action of the church's liturgy do the elements become sacrament of his self-offering to the communicants" (22). The Vatican is obviously concerned to retain an intrinsic conjunction between the activity of the church in the offering of the eucharist and the activity of Christ in offering himself to the Father and to the communicants. It is this concern that explains the Vatican's dissatisfaction. While the Vatican appreciates *BEM*'s affirmation of the sacrificial dimension of the eucharist,²² in the final analysis it

²¹ This is apparent even from the manner in which the Vatican text deals with this issue. It begins the discussion of sacrifice (18), then turns to "real presence", but in the middle of that it returns to the issue of sacrifice (20).

²² For example: "The eucharist is the sacrament of the unique sacrifice of Christ" (E8).

judges the *BEM* text to be inadequate because "it does not say unambiguously that the eucharist is in itself a real sacrifice, the memorial of the sacrifice of Christ on the cross" (22). The practical, ecumenical significance of this understanding of the eucharist will become evident in the issue of ministry.

The comparison with the U.S. response can be very brief at this point. It simply acknowledges that the *BEM* commentaries "take into explicit account Catholic understandings of ... the Eucharist as 'propitiatory sacrifice'" (11).

Ministry

In its general comments, the Vatican response is more restrained in its appreciation of the ministry section than it is with respect to the previous sections. It expresses appreciation especially for the fact that *BEM*'s presentation "goes in the direction of the major lines" of what the Vatican recognizes "as the faith of the church through the ages" (25, emphasis added). The reason for this hesitance is closely related to the issues to be considered here, namely, the relation of ordination and sacrament and episcopal succession.

Early in its appraisal of "ministry", the Vatican document singles out the issue of sacrament and ordination as a bone of contention (7, 9). Positively, it expresses appreciation of the fact that *BEM* is "open to" a sacramental understanding of ordination (26). But it soon becomes evident that mere *openness* to a sacramental understanding is not adequate. The Vatican document calls for a clearer statement of the sacramental dimension of the church as that comes to particular expression in the ordained ministry, specifically in its authority (26). A fundamental issue is at stake here, namely, the relation of the ordained ministry to the whole people of God.

What then is meant by the sacramentality of ordained ministry? The Vatican document describes the ordained ministry as "an effective and sacramental reality" through its relation to Christ, who is conceived of as an archetype (29). By virtue of this sacramental reality the minister acts *in persona Christi*. This is elaborated in a striking manner. The Vatican describes the sacramentality of the ordained minister in a way that is reminiscent of the conception of Christ's eucharistic presence. There the real presence of Christ is thought to be secured only by a real change in the elements. Regarding ordained ministry, the Vatican states that "we should not hesitate to see something of Christ's real and

sacramental presence in the ordained minister: a particular sign among others" (29). The Vatican document fails to articulate the nature of Christ's real presence in the ordained minister. It does, however, insist that the priesthood of the faithful and the hierarchical priesthood differ from each other not merely in degree but in essence (30). Although this statement stems from the Second Vatican Council, it must be noted that there it does not stand in the context of a real presence in the ordained minister analogous to that in the eucharist. Thus, the Second Vatican statement can be understood to mean that the hierarchical priesthood fulfills a *special role*, which as such differs essentially from that of the priesthood of the faithful. As it stands in the present Vatican response, the essential difference cannot help but place the ordained ministry in a higher ontological rank. This suggests that the presence of Christ is more real, or more intense, in some than in others *by virtue of ordination*. This construction, cannot help but frustrate from the outset a wish expressed in the Vatican response: "By stressing the sacramental aspect that marks a person before God and the community, we do not want to separate the minister from the community or exalt him above it, because we fully agree with the strong connection the document makes between the ordained ministry and the community" (29). The understanding of ordination presented in the response need not *separate* ordained ministers from the community, but it does in essence *exalt* them above the community.²³ Moreover, this understanding of ordination further complicates the issue of the ordination of women by compounding arguments based on tradition with those based on Christology.²⁴

²³ A basic tension plagues the Vatican response, a tension that is also present, though less severely, in *BEM*, namely, between the calling of the whole people of God and the position and role of the ordained ministry. Thus, in the Vatican response, one finds statements that come close to affirming a certain primacy or even primordially of the ministry of all believers. Affirming *BEM*'s emphasis on the diverse and complementary gifts which the Spirit bestows on the entire community, the Vatican comments that these gifts and charisms "form the background for all ministries in the church" (28). Aside from the fact that the term "background" is all too weak, the way in which the ordained ministry subsequently comes to the foreground tends to undermine the initial affirmations of the significance of the priesthood of all believers.

On the understanding of ordination presented in the Vatican document, the priest is regarded — by virtue, not of personal disposition, but of sacramental ordination — as a privileged *locus* of God's salvific presence, on which the sacramental reality of the eucharist and thus the sacramental presence of Christ to the faithful depend. MICHAEL KINNAMON explains this understanding as follows, "... the [eucharistic] sacrifice of Christ is the effect of the priest's action, based on his sacramental relationship to Christ" (*Ecumenical Trends* 17 [1988]: 39).

²⁴ Regarding tradition, the Vatican response takes issue with the reference in *BEM* to

The US response does not deal directly with the issue of the sacramentality of ministry. Arguments from silence enjoy a dubious status. Considering the nature of the response, however, this silence speaks volumes. It indicates that, unlike the Vatican response, the U.S. document finds no need to close *BEM*'s "openness" on this question. Again, this does not mean that the U.S. document in any way denies the notion of the real presence of Christ in the ordained minister. But it places it in a much broader context. In a suggested revision of *BEM*, it affirms that Christ, besides being present in a unique mode in the eucharist, is "really present" in various modes. The way in which the U.S. response affirms that the presiding minister "too" is taken up in the wondrous presence of Christ is remarkable:

He is always present in the body of the faithful gathered in his name (cf. Mat 18:20); present also in his Word, proclaimed by the witness of the Scriptures and the preaching of the mighty acts of God; present too in his minister who presides (12).

The contrast to the Vatican response is even more obvious in the way the U.S. document deals with one of the central issues in the Vatican's concern about the sacramentality of ordination: authority. On this issue the U.S. response moves in a direction that is diametrically opposite to that of the Vatican. Whereas the Vatican wishes to sharpen, with the effect of bolstering, the unique authority of the ordained ministry, the U.S. response tones *BEM* down on this score. *BEM* speaks unproblematically of Christ conferring the authority he has received from the Father on ministers through the act of ordination. The U.S. response suggests that this be revised, so that Christ is said to receive "full" authority from the Father, while he confers his authority "in some measure" on the ordained. Later, it further qualifies this

churches that "hold that the tradition of the church in this regard [the ordination of women] must not be changed". The Vatican comments, "In our view, it would be more accurate to say that we have no authority to change it, since we believe it belongs to the apostolic tradition of the church" (30; cf. 8). JOAN M. MCGUIRE points out that this seems to be a "less nuanced prohibition than that of the *Declaration on the Question of the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood*" (*Ecumenical Trends* 17 [1988]: 42).

Earlier, the Vatican response appeals, without further elaboration, to Christology: "We recognize fully that the experience of churches which practice the ordination of women constitutes inevitably a challenge to our own position. At the same time we believe that there are theological issues rooted not only in the understanding of tradition, but also of the Scriptures regarding Christology which lie at the heart of our convictions and understanding with regard to the admission of women to the ordained ministry" (30).

authority by emphasizing that those administering it are accountable to God and exercise it *under* the word of God (18).²⁵

Closely related to the issue of sacramental ordination is that of episcopal succession. In a rather tortuous manner, *BEM* attempts to bring the churches who divide on this issue to mutual acceptance of the validity of each other's ministries. While expressing a great deal of appreciation for *BEM*'s attempt, the Vatican response insists that ministry is valid only by valid ordination. It declares flatly, "ordained ministry requires sacramental ordination by a bishop standing in the apostolic succession" (36). Furthermore, the Vatican insists not merely on agreement among the churches on this score: "For us it is not only agreement on the question of apostolic succession, but also being situated within it that is necessary for recognition of ordination" (38-39). This wording suggests that the ministry of other churches cannot be considered valid until validated by the Roman Catholic church, or perhaps by the churches of the Orthodox communions.

This rather rigid approach to the mutual recognition of ministry stands in stark contrast to a more promising suggestion found in other parts of the Vatican response.²⁶ Elsewhere, it does not begin by calling into question the validity of ministries that do not stand within the episcopal succession. One might call this an approach from above, i.e., from the viewpoint of episcopal succession. Rather, it proceeds, from beneath, i.e., from the real communion that already exists between churches and ecclesial communities. From that vantage point, the issue of the validity of ministries outside of "episcopal succession" looks less formidable. Accordingly, the Vatican document suggests that the real communion that already exists implies a recognition of the ecclesial reality of the other, thus opening a window to recognizing the validity of the ministry within that ecclesial reality (36).²⁷

²⁵ This emphasis on the exercise of authority under the word reminds one of the description of the teaching office in the document on Revelation promulgated by the Second Vatican Council. There we read that "this teaching office is not above the word of God, but serves it ..." (*Dei Verbum*, no. 11).

²⁶ It is tempting to trace a basic tension such as this to the collaboration of the two Vatican agencies. Instructive as such source analysis may be, it would still have to come to terms with the significance of the Vatican response as it stands.

²⁷ Cf. the constructive approach with respect to apostolicity by the Eastern Orthodox-Roman Catholic Bilateral Consultation, Boston, 1986: "(a) the apostolicity of ministry is generally seen as derived from the continuity of the community as a whole in apostolic life and faith; the succession of ministers in office is normally agreed to be subordinate to that ecclesial apostolicity; (b) apostolicity seems to consist more in fidelity to the apostles' proclamation and witness than in any form of handing on community office" (*Soberness* 9 [1987]: 51).

While in the Vatican document this approach from below stands in tension with the more aloof approach from above, the U.S. response proceeds resolutely from below. Appealing to the real but imperfect communion that already exists between the Catholic Church and other communions, the U.S. response suggests that the Catholic Church recognize two degrees in the recognition of ordained ministries: on the one hand, the recognition of the real and full ministry of those ordained within episcopal succession; and, on the other, the recognition of real but not full apostolic ministry of word, sacrament and service. It is easy to object of course that the recognition of not-full apostolic ministry is a dubious gesture. One can also focus on the fact that it does involve the recognition of a "real" apostolic ministry. In other words, the judgement that the combination "real but not full" is impossible opens up two opposite possibilities: one can proceed from the description "not full" and call into question the validity of ministries outside of episcopal succession, or one can proceed from the description "real" and reassess the "not full" of other ministries. By proceeding from the unity and communion that is given with baptism into Christ, the approach from below creates openings for the mutual recognition of ministries.

Ecumenical Options at the Crossroads

The Vatican response to the major ecumenical issues which we have examined makes clear that this document reveals a Church that stands at an important ecumenical crossroads. The question remains, in what direction does this document point? There are at least three options. One direction is marked by a sign that reads "dead end". In the opposite direction one finds the warning, "Danger. Steep Precipice!" Straight ahead a sign indicates a winding road, some danger of falling rocks, but with as destination point, greater visible unity. The more precise identity of these paths will become clear in the following attempt to assess the direction indicated by the Vatican response.

Citing the many positive comments regarding *BEM*, one could argue that the Vatican document clearly points in the direction of greater unity. There is no question that this Vatican affirmation of large parts of *BEM* is significant. Nevertheless one cannot assess the overall direction of this document simply by tallying the negative and positive comments concerning *BEM*. A more important factor is the approach and attitude of one church towards other churches, especially when disagreement looms. Even positive comments can lose their potential

effect when they are encapsulated within an approach that is not ecumenically open.

Viewed from this perspective, the Vatican response displays many turn signals that point ominously in the direction of the road marked "no exit", to an ecumenically dead end street. Let me give some reasons for this assessment. The first two are of a somewhat methodological nature.

First, as we pointed out, this document totally ignores the ecumenically most promising notion of the Second Vatican Council, namely, that of the hierarchy of truths. I do not wish to suggest that the term itself is felicitous,²⁸ nor even to present its substance as a catholicon for ecumenical inertia. Nevertheless, this notion provides a way for the churches to move to greater unity without insisting on consensus on every point of doctrine that one of the churches considers important. The contrast between the approach of the U.S. bishops and that of the Vatican demonstrates how, without a framework such as that of a "hierarchy of truths", the path to unity is blocked.

Instead of being guided by a notion that makes it possible to deal constructively with differences without compromising the specific tenets of one's own communion, the Vatican response frequently closes the discussion by insisting on consensus on its own terms.²⁹ In fact, instead of working with a notion such as a hierarchy of truths, the Vatican response at one point appears to discard it. In the conclusion of its response, the Vatican insists that "the truths of faith are not divided from one another" but "constitute an organic whole" (40). This premise forms the basis for the conclusion that "full agreement on the sacraments is related to agreement on the nature of the church". As such these statements are true. The point at issue, however, is whether the Vatican response takes into account that, though obviously interrelated, these truths "vary in their relationship to the foundation of the Christian faith". Without that recognition, the emphasis on the inseparability and organic unity of the truths of faith comes to mean that one treats the doctrine of the real change, for example, as if it were of the same moment for church unity as the affirmation of the real presence of Christ.

²⁸ Concerning the problematic nature of the term, see the article mentioned in note 18 above.

²⁹ As JOAN MCGUIRE observes, on the whole "the influence of others [i.e., other faith communions] on the Vatican's response does not seem readily apparent..." (*Ecumenical Trends* 17 [1988]: 43).

A second reason for misgivings about the Vatican response is closely related to the above. It concerns the standpoint from which the Vatican evaluates *BEM*. The Lima document deliberately asks the churches to assess "the extent to which your church can recognize in this text the faith of the Church through the ages". It does not ask the churches simply to proceed from its dogmas, using them as unquestioned criteria for measuring where *BEM* is up to par and where it falls short. Rather *BEM* challenges the churches to place themselves under the judgement of a tradition that is in some sense over and beyond each church. Although the Vatican response often refers to the apostolic tradition, it frequently proceeds simply from Catholic dogma, indicating where the document is or is not acceptable. Thereby it in effect identifies Catholic dogma with the faith of the church throughout the ages.³⁰ The Vatican response gives the impression, as Joan McGuire observes, "that the Faith and Order Commission asked if the text reflects the teaching of your church, rather than if it reflects the faith of the Church throughout the ages".³¹

The problem that this point of view entails for the way in which a church approaches other communions can be illustrated by returning to the Vatican's positive comment on *BEM* as a whole that we cited earlier.³² At the beginning of its response the Vatican indicates that in its estimation the acceptance of *BEM* by various churches and ecclesial communities would represent an important step forward on the road to church unity. Although positive, this comment takes on different tone when one realizes that the Vatican appears to be using two standards. From the response as a whole it becomes abundantly clear that although the Vatican anticipates and welcomes the acceptance of *BEM* by other

³⁰ What remains implicit in the Vatican document is made explicit in the British response: "For us it [the *BEM* question under consideration here] must mean stating the extent to which we recognize the faith of the Catholic Church in the convergent perspectives found in the [*BEM*] text" (*Briefing 86* 16 [1986]:68).

³¹ *Ecumenical Trends*, 17 (1988): 41. Well in advance of the publication of the Vatican response, WILLIAM MARREVER warns against precisely this approach. Speaking of the question put to the churches in the *BEM* preface, he says, "The danger is that the churches will simply resort to the methods they are most familiar with, that is to say that they will assess the convergence statement in the light of their own confessional positions. This will not do for the simple reason that such an approach ignores at least two facts: their own alleged commitment to the ecumenical movement and the newness of the situation that has been created by the appearance of the convergence texts" (in MICHAEL FAHEY, ed., *Catholic Perspectives on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry: a Study Commissioned by the Catholic Theological Society of America* [Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1986], 57).

³² See pp. 691-692 above.

communions as a great step forward, the Vatican itself is by no means prepared to take that step. Such acceptance is out of the question, of course, because of the tacit and uncritical identification of its own position with the apostolic faith.³³ From that vantage point *BEM* falls short, but its acceptance by other communions would nevertheless mean a step forward because for them this would indicate closer proximity to the apostolic faith. From the Vatican perspective, the Lima document is regarded as a way station somewhere beneath its own position, but since other communions have not yet reached even this waystation, their arrival is welcomed as a step forward.³⁴ From its own standpoint, a Vatican "acceptance" of *BEM* cannot but appear as a step backward.³⁵ The discrepancy between the "acceptance" which the Vatican welcomes on the part of others and its own stance with respect to *BEM* illustrates the danger of proceeding from one's own position as the norm. Despite the best intentions, this approach envisions unity as a movement of others towards a fixed point,³⁶ in this case, the Vatican understanding of church and faith. Although this approach is tempered by other impulses, it is implicit in some of the basic assumptions of the Vatican response.

³³ The issue is not whether the Vatican could reasonably be expected simply to accept the Lima document. The problem arises only when, given its position, it does welcome such acceptance by other communions as a major step forward.

³⁴ This approach finds an instructive (and in hindsight, ironic) parallel in a review, written more than a quarter of a century ago, by a Roman Catholic theologian of a book by the then Protestant theologian, MAX THURIAN: "There are two ways in which a Catholic reader can see this book written by a Protestant: either he judges it from the point of view of Catholic orthodoxy and must admit that it is far removed, or he compares it with the doctrine of an average Protestant and recognizes that it is the result of a considerable effort to come closer to the Catholic position" (CHARLES BOYER, "Taizé, a Center of Ecumenism", *Unitas* 13 (1961), 244. Significantly, the book in question is devoted to ecumenism: *The Visible Unity of Christians and Tradition*.

³⁵ Simply to "accept" *BEM* is, of course, out of the question for almost any church. The term itself is indicative of an approach to *BEM* that is ecumenically fruitless. I use the term "accept" here only because it is applied in the Vatican response to other communions. The process enjoined by Faith and Order is not acceptance but "reception" (*BEM*, preface x). On reception, see, for example, WILLIAM A. RUSCH, *Reception: An Ecumenical Opportunity*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988.

³⁶ What JOAN MCGURKE says regarding the Vatican response to ministry applies to the document as a whole: "The Vatican's positive appraisal of ministry provides other churches with many transformative proddings. It lacks, perhaps, transformative proddings for the Catholic Church. Nevertheless, the dialogue which follows the responses and the secretariat's exhortation 'to continue the dialogue for the unity of faith ... as we move toward full communion' may hold the promise for such transformation" (*Ecumenical Trends* 17 [1988]: 43). As the Second Vatican's ecumenical charter has rightly emphasized, the road towards visible unity is one of inner conversion, structural renewal, and continual reformation for all the churches (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, nos. 6, 7).

Admittedly, the operation which *BEM* enjoins is not easy. To proceed from a position of *non-identity*, to attend to a norm beyond and over every tradition, one that calls every communion into question — this is a tall order for any church that endeavors to honour the truth-claims of doctrine, and *a fortiori* for communions that claim to embody the fullness of the church. Yet, to be convinced that this operation is not an impossible feat within the Catholic tradition, one need only consider the approach of the U.S. response.

Third, perhaps the most powerful factor that contributes to the impasse towards which the Vatican report points is the claim — whether explicit or implicit — of any one church to fullness. Although the terminology may be Roman Catholic (or Orthodox), the claim is not. Many traditions identify their own church with the church in its fullness. The road to Christian unity remains blocked, until all churches give up such claims.³⁷

It is crucial, however, that this claim be relinquished for the right reasons. A short-sighted and calamitous reason would be relativism. It reasons as follows: because we cannot agree on the "truths of faith", we

³⁷ From the Roman Catholic viewpoint a constructive contribution could be made, on the basis of *Unitatis Redintegratio*, by applying the *de facto-de jure* distinction. *Unitatis Redintegratio* clearly attributes fullness to the Roman Catholic Church (nos. 3, 4). At the same time, this document charts new paths in recognizing the ecclesial dimensions present in separated faith communities. This recognition cannot but place the claim to fullness in a new light. *Unitatis Redintegratio* makes a significant point regarding the various elements or endowments that build up and vivify the church. After recognizing that these endowments do exist outside the Catholic church, the document insists that they belong «by right» to the one Church of Christ» (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, no. 3). Even if we assume for the moment that the Roman Catholic Church is meant here, the emphasis on *de jure* is significant. It is of course illegitimate to appeal to a *de jure-de facto* distinction simplistically. The Vatican documents do also ascribe fullness *de facto* to the Catholic Church. Nevertheless, to recognize the presence of ecclesial elements that *rightly belong* to the (Catholic) Church to be present in communities that are *separated from* it is implicitly to acknowledge that such fullness is, to some degree, flawed. The decree on ecumenism confirms this indirectly when it states that, because of the divisions among churches, the Catholic Church «finds it more difficult to express in actual life her full catholicity in all its aspects» (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, no. 5). Only by an artificial distinction between the expression and essence of fullness could one maintain that the claim to fullness is wholly unaffected by the new ecumenical paths charted by Vatican II.

It is more likely, of course, that the Decree on Ecumenism here deliberately speaks of the «one church of Christ» in distinction from the «Roman Catholic Church» (see JOHANNES FEINER in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, vol. 2, ed. HERBERT VORGRÜBLER [Montreal: Palm Publishers, 1968], 75). In that case, fullness too can be ascribed to the Catholic church by virtue of its participation in «the one Church of Christ». As the substitution of «subsist» for «exist» (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, no. 4; *Lumen Gentium*, no. 8) indicates, such participation is real only together with other Christian communions.

conclude that no one has access to truth; let us, therefore, lay aside all truth claims and work together as best we can. Here, beyond the precipice, yawns the abyss. Staring itself blind at some communions' proud *claim to possess the truth*, the relativist option loses sight of *the truth that claims us*. As a result, the relativist abandonment of the claim to ecclesial fullness leads to spiritual emptiness. It robs Christianity of its vitality, and transmutes ecumenism into a purely pragmatic endeavor. It may achieve unity, but the unity achieved is not worthy of the name church.

There are better reasons for giving up the claim to fullness. First of all, although the New Testament ascribes fullness to the church, in an important sense fullness remains an eschatological reality. The letters to the Ephesians and Colossians ascribe fullness to God and to Christ, as well as to the community of Christ-followers (Eph. 1:22; 4:13; Col. 1:19; 2:9). But "fullness" is not simply a "possession". In Ephesians, believers are called to grow up into the fullness of the stature of Christ (4:13; cf. 3:19). Surely, that fullness will not be realized until the eschaton. If this is so, all communions are pilgrims on the road to fullness.

But there is another reason for relinquishing the claim to fullness. Let us assume for the moment that the fullness ascribed to the body of Christ in Ephesians can be unproblematically claimed for the church. Even then this claim can be made only for *the body* — singular — of Christ. It is impossible to make this claim for any particular part of the body of Christ, which, in the words of J.M.R. Tillard, is "broken in pieces",³⁸ or, in the words of John Calvin — spoken long before the church had been splintered into the more than 2,000 pieces called "denominations" — exhibits "only the broken pieces of a torn body".³⁹ When the author of Ephesians speaks of the length and breadth and depth of the love of Christ, he indicates that this is beyond our experience and knowledge. Nevertheless he prays that Christ-followers may grasp it. It is not surprising, however, that he prays that they may grasp it "*together with all the saints*" — and then adds, "that you may be filled with all the fullness of God" (Eph. 3:17-19). Similarly, when he insists that the purpose of all *ministry* in the faith-community is to grow up into the fullness of Christ, he links this immediately to "*unity in the faith*". Whatever there is to be experienced of the fullness of Christ

³⁸ "One Church of God: The Church Broken in Pieces", *One in Christ* 17 (1981): 2-12.

³⁹ Cited in WILLIAM J. BOUWMA, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth Century Portrait* (New York: Oxford, 1988), 215.

now, it can be experienced only together. It is a sad irony that, while Ephesians conceives of ministry in term of unity, some communions — primarily by virtue of certain forms of *ministry* — claim fullness at the expense of other communions, so that “fullness” becomes a barrier to unity. Rightly considered, fullness impels to — cries out for — unity.

Standing at an ecumenical crossroads, the Vatican response points to a road that is strewn with major obstacles to church unity, some so large that they appear to render the road impassable. Yet, this need not translate into pessimism for three reasons:

First, we may trust that the commitment of the Vatican to the unity of the church professed in this document and attested to by its very existence is real and irreversible.⁴⁰

Second, such commitment cannot but discover the fullness of the one church that may subsist in, but cannot simply be identified with, the Catholic Church.

Third, given this commitment, the Vatican appeal to the reality of the communion — and thus of the unity — that is given in Christ redirects the momentum of ecumenism away from the road marked “No Exit”, away from the dead-end street of uncritical self-identification, and towards the difficult but passable road that affords glimpses of the foundation of the Christian faith. This will happen only if all communions acknowledge that many of the “truths” about which they differ do not touch the heart of the faith, that some are built on other foundations, and that many of the “truths” they hold in common converge in the only true foundation for the unity of the church.

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⁴⁰ If confirmation be needed, the following statements should suffice. The Pope consistently presses the urgency of ecumenical endeavors. Consider, for example, his statement at the 1985 Extraordinary Synod of Bishops: “The restoration of unity must be above all a restoration of the inner dimension of the Christian life — a wholehearted personal commitment to Jesus Christ which makes intolerable any separation among those who share that commitment” (*Origins* 15 [1985]: 449). See also the statement by the Synod itself: “After these 20 years we can affirm that ecumenism has inscribed itself deeply and indelibly in the consciousness of the church. We bishops ardently desire that the incomplete communion already existing with non-Catholic churches and communities might, with the grace of God, come to the point of full communion” (*Origins* 15 [1985]: 449).

Addressing a Dutch ecumenical delegation, the Pope states, “We must insist again that *ecumenism is a pastoral priority in the Catholic Church and for all Christians*. This has been said many times, but it must be said again. All of us, on every level of the Church, must commit ourselves to seeing that the goal of visible unity is never lost sight of, and every legitimate path to that goal is taken” (*Secretariat for the Promotion of Christian Unity, Information Service* 60 [1986]: 16).

RÉSUMÉ

L'existence même de la réponse officielle Catholique Romaine au *BEM* marque une étape dans l'histoire de l'oecuménisme catholique. En plus, vu son caractère spécifique et autoritaire, ce document est le meilleur indicateur à présent de l'approche du Vatican à l'unité des églises dans le contexte des discussions oecuméniques actuelles. Son ton irénique et positif sur une large série de questions est remarquable. Sans minimiser ces signes d'espoir, l'article s'arrête principalement aux questions-clé où la Vatican diffère du *BEM*. La nature de ces dissensions, et spécialement la manière dont la réponse les aborde pourraient, en dernière analyse, se révéler décisives quant à l'influence réelle que le document exercera sur l'ouverture et la direction prise par le Vatican à propos de questions oecuméniques essentielles.

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